

It's not about the Mermaids: Animal Planet's track record of fabricated reality

Andrew Thaler

I have fond memories of Animal Planet. I grew up with Steve Irwin and Jeff Corwin. On the rare occasions when I have caught their recent programming, I've enjoyed shows like *River Monsters* and *Monsters Inside Me*. These are certainly not high-minded nature documentaries like *Planet Earth* and *Blue Planet*, but they manage to be both entertaining and informative. Then came the ghost hunters, pet psychics, bigfoot hunters, and mermaids. I started watching with a cynical eye*, started noticing things that seemed out of place: a catfish that looked already dead before being caught, a multitude of pets that looked surprisingly healthy considering their life in a hoarders house, conversations that seemed awkward, forced, and disjointed. And then there was [Mermaids](#).

I'm not naive to the realities of reality shows**, but I do believe that channels like Animal Planet, channels that bill themselves as educational programming, have a responsibility to present fact-based programming. I also believe the public has a reasonable expectation that Animal Planet's programming is at least honest in the events it portrays. *Whale Wars* is not [Storage Wars](#). I'm also not a reality TV hater, and believe that it is possible to create compelling, educational programming in that format. After all, had it aired today, the *Underwater World of Jacques Cousteau* would have been classified as a reality show.

I'm not even talking about intentionally fake shows, like *Lost Tapes* or *Mermaids: the Body Found*, nor am I talking about shows with supernatural premises, like *Pet Psychics* or *The Haunted*, although I do have problems with the ways those shows portray the supernatural credulously while marketing them as science-based. I'm talking specifically about shows where Animal Planet stages, distorts, or manufactures scenes and then presents them as being actual events captured by their film crew. I'm talking about outright deception with the intention of misleading the audience.

I'm also talking about evidence. Over the years, I have had hundreds of head-scratching moments while watching Animal Planet shows that I strongly suspect were staged. For some the evidence is there, but, unless someone involved in the production comes forward, most will remain unconfirmed. Instead of wallowing in hearsay, I present to you four cases in which we have convincing evidence—statements from members of the cast, discordance with widely reported events, or witness and expert testimony—that an Animal Planet show is staged.

Let's talk about snakes.

[Call of the Wildman](#) is a show that features the Turtleman, Ernie Brown Jr., an animal handler, taking on various bizarre wildlife scenarios. In the first episode of season 2, the Turtleman is called in to deal with a cache of venomous snakes—[Cottonmouths](#)—infesting a community pool in Danville, Kentucky. The Turtleman successfully captures the offending snakes and the children of Danville are now safe from pool monsters. Yay.

There's just one problem: cottonmouths don't live anywhere near that part of Kentucky.

Despite Animal Planet's insistence that the show portrays an actual encounter, snake expert and director of The Kentucky Reptile Zoo, Jim Harrison [says that the pool rescue was not only staged, but demonstrated very poor snake handling techniques](#). A later probe into the incident by the Danville parks department determined that ["the snakes were brought into the pool area, accompanied by a medic, and then were captured by Brown. The show left viewers with the impression that one snake was found in the pool and that others were on the property."](#)

It's just a TV show, so what?

Cottonmouths don't live in that region of Kentucky, but watersnakes do. Snakes get a bad rap, and when people are told that large, venomous snakes are hiding in their pools, they want to get rid of them. Following the episodes airing, Harrison received numerous calls from concerned citizens who had found or killed 'cottonmouths' that were, in all likelihood, harmless watersnakes***. The unsafe handling of the snakes promoted in the show can also lead to serious injuries should people attempt to capture actual cottonmouths using those techniques. And, of course, the city of Danville is rightfully concerned that a TV crew released poisonous snakes into their community pool.

Let's talk about Whale Wars.

Yes, we have a [long history of being critical of Sea Shepherd](#), but this is not one of those times. This post is about Sea Shepherd only inasmuch as they are the cast of [Whale Wars](#). Up until the 2012-2013 campaign, Animal Planet had its own film crew aboard and Animal Planet was responsible for compiling and editing the footage for the final product. Sea Shepherd had little control over what Animal Planet did with the footage once it was shot. All of which means that it is now up to Animal Planet to repair the tears in space-time which emerged in the 2011 Antarctic whaling season.

During season four of *Whale Wars*, the *Steve Irwin* assists in a search and rescue for a lost sailing vessel, the *Berserk*. What follows is a surprisingly poignant and heartfelt exploration of the risks and consequences of operating in the Southern Ocean. It was probably the single most moving episode in *Whale Wars*' 6 year history. I'm pretty hard on the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, but those kids willingly assisted in a search and rescue in one of the most dangerous seas on earth. No one can fault them for that and the crew of the *Steve Irwin* certainly deserves the commendation they were given.

Which is why it's particularly offensive that Animal Planet decided that the actions of the Sea Shepherd crew were not heroic enough on their own merit, and decided it needed to add a little extra conflict.

You could be forgiven if you thought that the *Steve Irwin* suspended its hunt for the Japanese whaling fleet in order to search for the *Berserk*. It certainly seemed that way in the show, with careful edits that made the crew appear to be discussing how much they ground they would lose by abandoning their hunt for the factory ship. There is, of course, one problem. Japan formally ended the 2011 whaling season on [February 18, 2011](#). The *Steve Irwin* joined the search for the *Berserk* on [February 23, 2011](#) ([download the official report here](#)). The timeline presented by Animal Planet is backwards. Rather than ending the show's season with a powerful story about the real dangers of life in the Southern Ocean, Animal Planet opted for a lukewarm ship-to-ship showdown in which, as usual, nothing happened.

Let's talk about alligators.

What separates [Gator Boys](#) from a slew of other "alligator wrangler" shows is that they are a trap-and-release team. While other shows feature trappers using baited hooks and then killing the alligators, the *Gator Boys* team uses their wits to wrangle nuisance alligators and then release them far from human habitation.

So the story goes.

Unfortunately, Florida wildlife officials see things rather differently. Following an incident in which a state wildlife officer observed the team reenacting a scene without proper permits and using a captive alligator, they opened an investigation in the *Gator Boys* program. The investigation determined that the *Gator Boys* were using methods considered unsafe by Florida's nuisance alligator program. [According to Lindsay Hord, director of Florida's nuisance alligator program](#): "Our nuisance alligator trappers are required to use safe handling techniques. All that wrestling they do, getting in the water with gators, is all potentially dangerous and we would not allow our nuisance alligator trappers to do that sort of thing. If these are captive alligators they're handling, they're different from the wild ones. They're not as afraid of people as a wild one would be. We hope people don't watch this show and say "I see how they do it," and try it with wild alligators."

So, either the *Gator Boys* are repeatedly in violation of their trapping permit, or they're frequently using captive alligators to stage rescues. Either way, this is poor form for Animal Planet.

Let's talk about Bigfoot.

Actually, let's not, because I said we are not talking about the supernatural premise of Animal Planet's shows. Rather, let's talk about the Bigfoot hunters, and how Animal Planet manipulated their own experiences to manufacture mysterious "sightings".

In [*Finding Bigfoot*](#), a team of Bigfoot hunters wander around random forests looking for evidence of the mighty Sasquatch****. The show relies heavily on thermal imaging to highlight heat anomalies in the distance. In one episode, an unidentified figure is seen standing in a field. From a distance, the figure is bright, but hard to identify. As the team approaches, the camera cuts away from the thermal image and turns to a surprised team and exclaims that the unidentified creature disappeared into the forest. What was that figure? Did the show finally capture a slightly credible Bigfoot sighting?

[According to Matt Moneymaker, founder of the Bigfoot Research Organization and leader of the Finding Bigfoot team, the answer is a resounding no.](#) The creature they saw, well, I'll let Mr. Moneymaker explain:

"The heat blip in the meadow was a horse. I said so on camera. I talked about the horse for a good long while. I figured the producers would edit it honestly, but they didn't. Their editing made it look as though I did not identify the figure before it ran off. I did. It was a horse. They inserted lines from other scenes where I talk about something running away before I could figure out what it was."

[source](#)

In a different episode, Moneymaker is seen chasing a "bipedal creature" into the woods—perhaps thinking that, after decades of searching, he could just run a Bigfoot down. Or maybe not:

"The thing I ran after up the hill was a human — someone who was sneaking around us in the woods trying to watch the production in progress. I said so repeatedly and vehemently at the time, for the cameras, but they edited out all of that in order to make it seem unclear what I was chasing after."

[source](#)

Another team member adds "[Everything Matt said is true. We're getting screwed. You people have no idea how much Matt and I fought with the producers to have any legitimacy on this show...Sorry to all of the squatchers that are bummed out on how they're doing it. I assure it isn't us.](#)"

So, just to recap, Animal Planet's manipulation and distortion of their programming is so bad that even Bigfoot hunters are claiming it compromises their credibility.

Whisky Tango Foxtrot?

These are not isolated incidents, and it is not just the big budget [mockumentaries](#). Animal Planet has a long track record of systematically distorting its ostensibly educational programming to manufacture drama. These four examples were chosen because they are well supported with reliable evidence, however, watching Animal Planet critically reveals scenes like these in almost every show*****. The examples above highlight some of the real world

consequences of this manipulation, some of which are simply offensive—like devaluing the importance of an at-sea search and rescue—and some are damaging to reputations—like spreading rumors of snake infestations or making people look like fools; but when these shows actually threaten the animals featured—either by whipping up fear or promoting unsafe handling practices—then we have crossed a dangerous line. Making people who have consented to appear on their shows look stupid may be irresponsible, but endangering wildlife that have no control over how (or if) they are portrayed is immoral.

*To be fair, I rarely watch cable TV, and my Animal Planet viewings are largely limited to when I visit my family for the holidays or am stuck in a hotel while traveling.

**I was even on one, and the first reader who was not at my wedding that can guess which show gets an internet cookie.

***[Here's a handy guide that shows how to tell the difference between watersnakes and cottonmouths.](#)

****I refuse to use the term “Squatch”. “Squatch” is a stupid word.

*****Yes, David, even the Puppy Bowl.

A roundup of misleading, deceptive, and dangerous shows produced by Discovery Communications

8-12-2014 Andrew Thaler

It's no secret that we've produced quite a bit of critical commentary regarding Discovery Communications (whose properties include Shark Week, Animal Planet, TLC, and many others) over the years. This Shark Week, we're seeing a massive spike in interest around their less-than-factual productions. Here, for your convenience, is a quick roundup of articles we've written about misleading, deceptive, and dangerous shows produced by Discovery Communications.

The Big Three:

- [Mermaids: The New Evidence is a Fake Documentary](#)
- [Megalodon: the New Evidence is a fake documentary](#)
- [Shark of Darkness: Wrath of Submarine is a fake documentary](#)

Other criticisms:

- [It's not about the Mermaids: Animal Planet's track record of fabricated reality](#)
- [Anti-shark stereotypes in "River Monsters"](#)
- [Mermaids do not exist, and five other important things people should, but do not, know about the ocean](#)
- [We know what the Bloop is and it's not mermaids](#)
- [The Trouble with Teacup Pigs](#)

Posted on other sites:

- [Shark Week Lied to Scientists to Get Them to Appear in "Documentaries"](#)
- [Experts: Shark Week's Zombie Sharks Harasses Animals](#)

You might wonder why we bother doing this. It's certainly not for the glory or the thrill of moderating thousands of hateful comments or the [actual violent threats](#). It's because, believe it or not, we love Discovery Communications. We love Shark Week. We love Mythbusters. We love the crazy, goofy, pumpkin chuckin' shows. Hell, I even enjoyed Mermaids (what I don't enjoy is what Mermaids does to the state of ocean literacy). Discovery has an audience far larger than any we could hope to achieve at Southern Fried Science and it has the potential to educate and entertain. We're not trying to bring down it down, we're trying to raise it up. When Discovery is good, it's great. When it's bad, it's the worst.

So as long as Discovery is spitting out garbage, we'll be right here shoving it back in their faces. But when they make shows truly excellent shows like their deep-sea shark special Alien Sharks, we'll be right there with them, too.